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Within the EU perspective as demonstrated by Lithuania's EU Presidency Programme, Belarus remains an outsider of the EaP. Thus, the current status quo in the Belarus-EU relations seems to be a foregone conclusion for both parties involved. Moreover, in case of any political changes in Belarus, the EU seems to lack any pre-developed strategy focused on this country. Furthermore, since the EaP itself never became a priority of the EU foreign policy, it is unlikely that the EU could effectively react and comprehensively support any apparent changes in Belarus and thus prove its status of an important player in the EaP region.

Hence, the current configuration of the EaP measured by a given partner country's stance towards the Association Agreements with the EU provides that the EaP is mainly focused not on outsiders in order to attract them with the EU policy mechanisms provided by the EaP, but merely to further engage the leaders of the initiative. Thus, since the implementation of the EaP, Belarus-EU bilateral relations could be characterized as ad hoc actions that were at best planned for a short term.

The paper is a case study focused on the perspectives of the Belarus-EU relations within the EaP framework addressing the factors of the authoritarian nature of the political regime in Belarus, the factor of the country's membership in the Russian-lead Customs Union and the reasons why the EaP has proven to be not the most attractive option for Belarus authorities.

1. GEOPOLITICAL BACKGROUND

Today's Belarus is often viewed through its geographic location between the European Union and Russia, and perceived as an object of geopolitical competition among these two "centers of gravity in Europe".[1] Moreover, both the country's Soviet legacy and the nature of its domestic political system are presented as important elements of this approach as they allegedly provide explanations for the country's alliances. The former is explained through the prism of wide usage of the Russian language and the alleged "backward[ness] in terms of national and civic identity".[2] The latter is embodied in the formula "Belarus, the Europe's last dictatorship" and is firmly attached to the personality of the country's president Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Among all the states of the EU Eastern neighborhood, Belarus is characterized by the lowest level of engagement with EU and the highest degree of integration with Russia, particularly after the signing of the Treaty on Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) on 29 May 2014. However, this pro-Russian alliance choice of Belarus (Customs Union, EEU, CSTO, etc.) is rather a result of the country's rational economic interests which Belarus coherently pursues and not of abstract "cultural preconditions" mentioned by some commentators.[3] Moreover, after the annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula by Russia in March 2014, Belarus remains the only Eastern Partnership country free from any kind of conflict related to ethnic or territorial issues.

2. BELARUS-EU RELATIONS FORMAT

While addressing the format of Belarus-EU re-

lations, there are two aspects which should be distinguished. The first one refers to the formal framework of this relationship, i.e. its actual platforms and rules. The second deals with the political context of the bilateral ties and merely reflects the dynamic nature of international relations. Both aspects are interrelated, but the political aspect is subordinated to the formal one, i.e. regardless of the nature of their political regimes the EaP countries are subjects of the same policies framework.

The formal aspect of the Belarus-EU relations is linked with Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership track of the ENP. This policy is based on the more-for-more principle which implies that "the EU will develop stronger partnerships and offer greater incentives to countries that make more progress towards democratic reform."[4] Furthermore, each EaP country's rapprochement with the EU is measured through the prism of the respective Association Agreements (AA) designed to replace Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA).[5] These Association Agreements as viewed by the EU are to provide a detailed framework and guidelines for the significant range of political, economic, and social reforms in each country of the EU eastern neighbourhood. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) part of these agreements is of particular importance since it can be negotiated only under the precondition of the WTO membership of the contracting party.[6]

Thus, such formal framework of the Belarus-EU relations implies a number of general aspects. First, the very format is designed by the EU and is mesuared accordingly. In other words, it is the EU that sets the framework for bilateral cooperation. At the same time, this framework never contained any clear reference to the perspective of EU membership of any EaP country, though for instance the EU-Moldova AA in its preamble refers to Moldova as "a European country."[7] However, this formulation does not contain a direct reference to Art. 49 TEU which stipulates that any European country may apply to become an EU Member State.

Secondly, the progress of these bilateral relations is "measured through their progress towards the Association Agreements with the EU and compliance with the formula "deeper integration – higher conditionality."[8] On the one hand, in practice such an approach "resembles a two-tier league where the "champions" who [on the eve of the Vilnius EaP Summit] were about to initiate or sign the association agreement are delegated to the higher tier, while those lacking it – to the second tier."[9] On the other hand, being "the EU's attempt to consolidate its individual members' alignment with the post-Soviet space and mould it into a multilateral framework", this "multilaterally designed framework was reduced to a set of bilateral alignments undermining the effectiveness of the EaP from the very outset."[10]

Thirdly, the initiation of the Association Agreements is conditioned upon each EaP country's non-participation in the Russian-led integration projects in the post-Soviet space.[11] This implies that the EU-led Eastern Partnership and the Russian-driven Eurasian Economic Union are sometimes viewed as competing integration projects.[12] However, contrary to the full-fledged membership perspective in the Customs Union, the final benefits of the integration under the EaP track are still unclear which significantly complicates what is referred to as "a European perspective to the region."[13] This complies with the fact that the EaP had never become a clearly-defined priority for the EU politics since the initiative was fostered by those countries whose geopolitical interests lay with the EaP area whereas the EU countries with different strategic priorities were not willing to equally contribute to the EaP development.

With regard to Belarus, the formal framework contains a number of country-specific aspects. First, being involved in the EaP, Belarus takes part only in its multilateral track.[14] Second, Belarusian adherence to international alliances has a pivotal role for assessing the country's perspectives within the EaP formal framework. Of particular importance here is Belarus' membership in the Russian-led Customs Union and observer status in the WTO. This setting of Belarus' alliances does not comply with the aforementioned conditionality set for opening negotiations on the preparation of the Association Agreement and its DCFTA part. Thus, within the EU perspective Belarus is an outsi-

der even in the Eastern Partnership's "second tier."

Belarus' outsider status in the EaP is closely linked with the political context of the country's bilateral relations with the EU, and notably with the nature of its political regime commonly known as "Europe's last dictatorship." In this regard it is necessary to make an overview of the developments of the Belarus-EU from two angles – the view from Brussels as well as the view from Minsk.

3. BELARUS-EU RELATIONS À LA BRUSSELS

Belarus-EU relations are characterized by the fact that Belarus remained the only EaP country which lacks its own Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU.[15] While other EaP countries got their PCAs in the late 1990s, the "[r]atification of an EU-Belarus Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (negotiated in 1995) has been frozen since 1997 in response to the political situation in the country." [16] As a result, since then the EU has regularly been addressing its concerns with regard to problems with democracy and rule of law in Belarus, the restrictions against political opposition, civic society and media imposed by official Minsk, violations of human rights and electoral standards, as well as the existence of political prisoners in the country.[17] Described by the EU as "a policy of critical engagement", this approach dominates the Conclusions of the Foreign Affairs Council adopted on 15 October 2012 which define the present nature of Belarus-EU relations.[18] As a result, the EU has conditioned the full-fledged re-launching of the bilateral track of the Belarus-EU relations upon the elimination by Belarus authorities of the aforementioned shortcomings of political nature. Hence, the EU sets up a threshold based on its values, which the Lukashenka's regime should reach in order to reinstate the bilateral track of the relations.

Consequently, in the Czech EU Presidency Programme which inaugurated the Eastern Partnership, the inclusion of Belarus into the EaP initiative and the participation of the Belarusian officials in the EaP opening summit in Prague was conceded only conditionally as dependent on the steps taken by the Belarusian authorities.[19] Consequently, a gradual improvement of the mutual relations was expected by the EU to be embodied in a step-by-step facilitation of the constructive relations between the parties both in political and social aspects. With regard to the political developments, the establishing of a momentum for an asserted dialogue between the parties was expected. As for the social aspect, the main focus of the EU was thought to be the support of the civic society in Belarus.[20] In other words, "the inclusion of Belarus into the EaP framework can be seen as a breakthrough, as it opened the way for the institutionalization of relations, at least at multilateral level."[21]

The very reference to the Czech EU Presidency Programme may serve as an illustration of the EaP in general and the EU stance towards Belarus in particular. Further contextual analysis of the EU Presidency Programmes and the 18-month programmes of the Council of the European Union makes it possible to observe the consistency of the EU policies with regard to the EaP countries both on the bilateral and multilateral tracks and to eliminate here-and-now events from the discourse.

Thus, the 18-month Programme of French, Czech and Swedish Presidencies refers to Belarus from the aforementioned perspective of political conditionality and stresses the opportunity to maintain a full-fledged cooperation with Belarus within the ENP framework provided that "the political situation in Belarus significantly improves."[22] In other words, the political aspect of the Belarus-EU relations determines their intensity but does not influence their format.

The three consequent 18-month Programmes – of the Spanish, Belgian and Hungarian Presidencies, the Polish, Danish and Cypriot Presidencies as well as the Irish, Lithuanian and Greek Presidencies – repeatedly emphasize the importance and dynamics of the EU-EaP cooperation in the field of customs and list all partner countries, including Belarus.[23] The only other reference to the Belarusian situation can be found in the 18-month Programme of the Irish, Lithuanian and Greek Trio. It is stressed that the HR and the EEAS "will closely monitor domestic developments in ... Belarus, in the wake of the parliamentary elections in th[is]

countr[y]."[24] This reference rather confirms the EU policy of critical engagement towards Belarus and complies with the thesis that the EU

- "stands ready to improve and deepen its relations with Belarus", and
- "remains prepared to assist Belarus in democratisation and modernisation" upon significant improvement of the political situation in the country.[25]

In addition to the inaugural Czech EU Presidency Programme, the only two individual EU Presidency Programmes which specifically mention Belarus are those of Sweden and Poland, the EaP initiators. Along with other EaP countries Belarus is listed in the Swedish EU Presidency Programme within the context of the EU external relations aimed at enhancing the EU-EaP relations and promoting of "these countries' integration with the EU in important areas such as trade, migration and legislation."[26] In case of the Polish EU Presidency Programme it is argued that the goal of the EU policy towards Belarus is to encourage Belarus to cooperate with the West, provided that the country respects basic principles of democracy and human rights. Such a formulation is somewhat two-fold. On the one hand, it acknowledges the importance of the EU engagement with Belarus. On the other hand, it maintains its own framework for this engagement based on the EU values which form the basis for the threshold set for the Belarusian officials, should they wish to intensify the bilateral track of the Belarus-EU relations.

Moreover, while recognizing Belarus as "an integral part of the European heritage and the European community of nations"[27], the issue of Belarus' potential membership in the EU even in the very long-term perspective is not on the agenda. In this situation the most effective factor for mutual Belarus-EU engagement within the existing status quo could be the fact that the EU acknowledges itself as Belarus' "principal partner in trade and important partner in sectoral and regional development".[28] Considering the nature and foundations of the official Minsk's approach towards the bilateral relations with the EU, the economic sphere could become a common ground for mutual rapprochement.

4. BELARUS-EU RELATIONS À LA MINSK

Minsk version of the Belarus-EU relations is based on somewhat different foundations than the one presented by Brussels. According to the official website of the Belarusian MFA, the European Union is presented as one of Belarus' two big neighbors along with Russia. Belarusian authorities see themselves as the EU's "reliable partner" in the areas of security, energy safety, human trafficking and crime control and emphasize the need for further the intensification of the cooperation with the EU in economic and environmental spheres and people-to-people contacts. At the same time, the official Minsk underscores the necessity to maintain "an equitable dialogue and comprehensive cooperation" between Belarus and the EU, and the EaP is seen as one of the platforms for achieving this goal.[29]

The reference to the equitable partnership has particular importance with regard to Belarus' perception of the bilateral relations with the Union. The logic behind this approach has been explained by Siarhei Martynau, the then Belarus' Foreign Minister.[30] He emphasized the need of free choice between the integration into the EU and equitable partnership with it. Moreover, regardless of either choice the partner countries should become subjects of "equal access to all Partnership benefits." Hence, the EaP framework is seen by Belarus as "a result-oriented cooperation framework, based on common democratic values" which "should serve pragmatic interests of all partner states and the Wider Europe in general by fostering sustainable development, economic and social modernization in this part of the continent."[31]

The current Belarus' Minister of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makei largely repeats the rhetoric of his predecessor stressing Belarus' readiness "for an open, sincere and equal dialogue with the European Union."[32] Moreover, he emphasizes the need for the EU to switch from its critical engagement towards Belarus in favor of "a dialogue whenever it is possible and beneficial for Belarus and the Eu-

ropean Union" in order to maintain "a long-term cooperation strategy between Belarus and the European Union"[33] while not seeking the EU membership.[34]

Thus, official Minsk is "attempting to "de-politicize" the Belarus' bilateral relations with the EU […] thus ignoring the EU's conditioning of normalisation of relations to the prior release and rehabilitation of political prisoners."[35] Moreover, the reference to the Wider Europe rather demonstrates the willingness of the Belarusian authorities to "secure a balanced and mutually beneficial cooperation with both Russia and the European Union."[36] Such a framework implies the presence of the Russian factor in the Belarus-EU relations. This presence in combination with the reference to the equitable partnership with the EU implies that the very EaP framework based on the "either-or" logic for making a geopolitical choice between the EU and Russia is not attractive for the official Minsk.

5. SEARCHING FOR A PROPER STRATEGY?

The two views on the Belarus-EU relations from Brussels and Minsk have much in common with regard to rhetoric but are based on two different approaches. On the one hand, both Belarus and the EU emphasize the importance of the relations with each other and the need to improve and further develop mutual engagement. On the other hand, there is a clash in approaches.

The EU approach towards Belarus rests upon the formal framework of the EaP and the EU values which represent the core of the EU policy of critical engagement. In other words, in Brussels' view, Belarus has to demonstrate significant progress in implementing the EU viewpoint for improving democracy and human rights standards in the country in order to become able to fully benefit from the EU-designed EaP formal framework.

Belarusian viewpoint on the country's bilateral relations with the EU is merely aimed "to force the EU to swap a values-based approach for a more pragmatic *Realpolitik*-based one."[37] It implies elimination of the political aspect of the bilateral relations. The stress on the opportunity to choose the type of the engagement with the EU, with the subsequent access to all EaP benefits regardless of the option chosen, implies the rejection of the "more-for-more" principle which constitutes the ENP core approach.

Another peculiarity which indirectly relates to the format of the approaches is the involvement of the Russian factor in the bilateral Belarus-EU relations. On the one hand, the formal framework of the EaP with regard to both tracks does not foresee any kind of Russia's involvement into the Belarus-EU relations. On the other hand, Belarus' multidimensional strategic partnership with Russia is a matter of political reality. Therefore, the attitude of the Belarusian authorities could be described as an attempt to refrain from the "either-or" ultimate choice between the integration with the EU or Russia, and at the same time to prioritize partnership with Russia, keeping pragmatic, in-depth and mutually beneficial relations with the EU.

Thus, the Belarus-EU relations can be measured through the formal framework of the EU Eastern Partnership Programme and the approaches of both parties towards it. In Brussels view, the Belarus-EU relations defined by the conditionality of the political situation in the country, require the potential ability of the EU to to act swiftly and efficiently under the pressure of significant potential changes in Belarus. However, the reference to the EU Presidency Programmes shows three trends. Firstly, Belarus has always been a non-prioritized peripheral member of the EaP framework. Secondly, the policy of critical engagement pursued by the EU towards Belarus cannot be a long-term strategy *per se*. Thirdly, despite its importance for the Belarusian civil society and political opposition, the multi-stakeholder platform entitled the European Dialogue on Modernisation cannot take this role for two reasons. On the one hand, aimed at an "understanding on the vision of what a modern and democratic Belarus could look like and about what would be needed to take us there"'[38], it cannot predict the format of the apparent changes. On the other hand, in addition to its strategic uncertainty, this format is characterized by the virtual non-participation of the public stakeholders in it.[39]

The current peripheral status of Belarus within the EaP framework and the ineffectiveness of the policy of critical engagement as a long-term perspective can be illustrated by reference to the Programme of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union which marked the 2013 Vilnius EaP Summit presented as "a defining moment in the EU's relationship with Eastern European partners."[40] However, Belarus was the only EaP country which was not specifically referred to in the Programme. All the other five countries have been measured through their progress in negotiating association agreements, including Azerbaijan, a "tangible progress" in negotiations with which was expected.[41] Such a *status quo* implies that the EU has neither expected anything from Belarus, nor had any strategy toward it. As a result, within the context of the EU's formal and political format of its bilateral relations with Belarus, the current status quo of these relations can be described as *ad hoc* actions that were at best planned for the short term.

This situation has three major consequences. First, the EU has apparently become used to the current *status quo* in its relations with Belarus. Second, in case of any significant political changes in Belarus, the EU seems to lack any well-developed long-term strategy in the bilateral relations with this country. Third, the current politically conditioned framework would very likely not be effective if the EU's swift reaction and active participation in support of the apparent changes in Belarus were needed. Should the EU withdraw its critical engagement, it would mean a moral loss with regard to the EaP role as a platform "based on shared values such as democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and basic freedoms."[42] Considering the current political settings in and around Belarus this significantly reduces the potential of the EU as a regional player.

6. THE CONSEQUENCES OF *AD HOC* POLICIES

The format of Belarus-EU relations has proven its inefficiency. The first reason for this inefficiency is the incompatibility of formats. The current EaP framework is centered on the comprehensive Association Agreements, which implies not a partnership but merely an integration option without clearly indicated EU membership perspectives for the EaP countries. However, it fails to consider the current reality of the existing political alliances of the EaP member states. In other words, the countries are indirectly asked to make an "either-or" choice between the EaP and the Russian-led Customs Union/EEU option.

Hence, this framework is not compatible with the approach of the authorities of Belarus, who strive for an equitable partnership option instead of the integration with the EU. Furthermore, it does not fit the political course of the Belarusian authorities which prioritizes its "strategic partnership" with Russia but does emphasize the high-priority importance of cooperation with the EU.

The second reason is the difference of approaches based on the political factor. While the EU applies a value-based framework in its critical engagement policies towards Belarus, the Belarusian authorities prefer a *Realpolitik* approach which implies a de-politicization of the bilateral relations with the EU. The renunciation of this approach by either side would merely mean a moral loss for the party which would accept the other's approach. However, it seems that both Belarus and the EU have apparently become used to the current status quo in their bilateral relations, which does not contribute to the maintenance of a long-term strategy of Belarus-EU relations.

Thus, the current format of the Belarus-EU relations within the EaP framework seems quite irrelevant for the essence of these relations. In other words, from a pragmatic point of view, the EaP multilateral framework has a rather symbolic meaning both for the EU and Belarus. For the EU it is important to keep Belarus on this multilateral track, whereas for Belarus it is important to be at least formally engaged with the EU. At the same time, the pursuance of the Belarus-EU relations on a purely bilateral track would enable the parties to find some room for at least a mid-term cooperation without morally losing face by accepting the other party's stance, and take into account the peculiarities of Belarus' political alliances.

NOTE:

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